

Once a murderer

Once a murderer

poems by Zoë Landale

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AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. TOUCH

EVERGREENS REMIND HER

Evergreens remind her of a man's eyes;
Dark behind the garage at the police station,
they're out on smoke break.
It's four a.m. and they're floating: tiredness,
adrenaline from the night's calls,
weightless pheromones.
A hand on her arm. His voice,
water against sand, says,
*I figure there's not much point
to being an officer,
to what I do, if I can't keep the promises I made
in my marriage.*

She laughs, understanding
as he does,
marriage is a boat
where you are both the keel
and wind, red paint on the hull
and the creaming liquid buoyancy beneath.
They both are borne up by long-
term love.

It is not until weeks later,
surrounded by evergreens,
his eyes come back to her, restless
as imagination, a raven that won't
settle down, or can't.
Temptation is subtle,
finds resonance in places
you might never suspect.
Yielding to the clarity of trees,
she realizes, Ah, he wanted me too.
Guilt and ease foam effervescent
at her heart.

SLEEPING BEAUTY REVISITED

Wherein they corroborate bona fides

She was Sleeping Beauty, drowsy
with twenty extra pounds
life in the country with red climbing roses
and a husband who thought
she was an unrecognized genius;
godmother to dogwood trees
and Japanese cherries.
Poems and novels bloomed continuously.

longs for a new story
cut roses droop
in three days
pour of light grey
from the sky

He was RCMP, **always** gets his
crunched up her gravel driveway in an unmarked car,
plain cop black,
to jolt her awake. **caffeine**
While he patted her arm and probed,
his partner frowned at author photos **his other wife**
on the books she'd fanned on the table.
Her daughter took friends outside
to check out the police car.

A prior background check

The man's superior had said he was a prince
among investigators, homicide and major crime—
He's the officer who—
we all know what princes'
mission in life is

But she didn't want to hear about blood and children
and an axe, she wanted his heart
bright as a Valentine, to tilt it one way
and then another in the summer light.
She wanted to extract what made him good,

fuckin cannibal

slice it thinly onto paper.

Research, well-behaved as a police dog at obedience trials

She had a surprise coming, yet another
The kiss of adrenaline enchanted her,
romance of it cold
along her arms. The alive high. for medicinal
purposes only

She came out on shift with him,
dusk to dawn.

At one in the morning,
a call came in about armed robbery;

a fable where
she doesn't know
the ending!

they went out looking
for suspects: four males,
one female.
The black car slid through deserted streets
a lit needle through a photograph,
stitched night into a streak
of headlights.
Then the call for backup.
He floored the car;
she laughed, charmed with speed,
the long beams of white hallucinogenic
against the pulsing dark.

what's so funny?

In the mall parking lot, two marked cars
drew up beside them at angles.
Lightbars twirled colors, notice how she's got to
have something blooming?
headlights aimed at the officer who crouched,
gun held two-handed, motionless suspects
face-down on concrete.
Then suddenly there were police
all over reading
people their rights from orange cards
while she hung onto the edge
doesn't want to trip
on bodies
of the door, listened to the snick
of handcuffs.

*Research runs amok in the ring, barks, paws its handler, insists
on graduating from the background class to the foreground NOW*

After that, who could love roses?
She was so awake it took a week before
she could sleep a night through.

She kept seeing the frieze
induced by the gun,
the long night of questioning
she watched on video:
the relentless way fluorescents aggravate
at three a.m.,
the way he called some of the suspects
Son, weary kindness in his voice, that's when she falls,
right then,
watch her go over
drawing out the shape of what had happened.

Pink flushing the sky.
Roses were part of her somnolent past,
though fragrant, heart-breakingly so;
her wall against the world:
come back in a few years
and the *Blanc de Coubert* hedge roses have dignity
will be six feet high. hundreds of years of
romantic history
doesn't hurt either

*He kissed me at the Christmas party, the cute officer with black hair
says. He said what about his marriage? Hab. I could have an affair
with him tomorrow.*

Now Sleeping Beauty's outside the thorns,
much thinner and short on roses;
any fool can grow them
badly
she sold the palace.
She uses the passion
she plucked from the prince
who's only done
what the story said
back in *fin de siècle* days
though when the woman driving beside her
goes into detail
about the kiss,
Beauty's heart feels like a handful
of ripe strawberries
hurtling toward a concrete wall.

When he's been by, moments later
she's still dislocated
by the turbulent swirl of wings.

pinions creak through air
like a gate to the mysteries
opening

FALCON & MOON

Across the café table, face wary,
he leaned away from her.
She asked questions and he waited
for the pass
that had to be why she'd asked
Can just the two of us go for coffee?

regardless of family
photographs

This time when she'd walked up the steps,
said hi to the officers
smoking outside, he hadn't even grabbed her
in front of them.

I own
the audience

In the café, she wrote and smiled
as though oblivious,
let him enjoy that good adrenaline rush

quick swoop when the
the ground drops
away & momentarily
you hang in air

he'd turned her onto: when was it going to happen?
She thought of him invoking wife, red serge, promises . . .

props, the photographs
he uses as warnings
or excuse

Noted with tenderness
he was a slightly stooped falcon
feathers missing
without the gloss of a younger
bird, eyes still a danger, though,

the courtship gaze:
prolonged eye contact

he had that effortless raptor's charm
so she lured him with talk of crime,
watched him bend closer.

She was the moon, drawing him
toward still water & drowning
only instead of turning a corner to the pond
she stayed with police work.
barbless hooks

On their way out, he was so relieved,
he sweet-talked two waitresses.

Going back she kept up the blinding
of light, asked things she'd ask any friend,
wondered what would happen
when they disengaged.
It was simple, he just said her name, bemused,
sketched goodbye in the air.
No hugs, no caresses.

She laughed all the way home. touch[é]

ephemera in the big sky
of life. Herons nudge with presence,
baby spiders parachute away on the wind,
silk threads dangle.
One grazes the woman's face in passing:

what's to tell, sun on a line of light?

THE STORY* WINDS THROUGH MOUNTAINS

story*
a fictitious tale, shorter
and less elaborate
than a novel

Every summer, the RCMP helicopter pilot** peers
down, alert for the green
fat fingers of marijuana waving from swamps.

**credited with x-ray
vision,
much-hated

Bare knobs of rock tilt as he banks
the chopper, the horizon swings
forty-five degrees to the windshield.
Disorientation brings a strange, abrupt joy.

adrenaline & the gold
sheen of happiness,
moving like a well-
schooled horse

The landscape late in August is sere.
Marijuana's emerald.
That's why in the helicopter
it stands out so clearly
to a trained eye, though to hers
hardhack or pine are not dissimilar.

transgressing a closed
narrative

Discernment is a grace she learns slowly.

stories hold back what we
mean, it's the narrator
she learns to watch, how
strong longing bends us
in wind

What she's absorbed from the officer
who gets her the ride
is the module of command decisions,
the flick of humour to move them along.
what's not said
colour half-way
between dusk
& summer

Meanwhile she runs sixteen miles a week;
she and her dog enter the blur
of nirvana in motion. Sunlight in bars
if she were to die
tomorrow, this is what
she'd remember

between trees, the rise of trail
Both of them lean now, and hard as brown roots.
She passed the RCMP physical. harsh triumph
He said he always knew she would.

She feels badly about taking his heart
though she uses it constantly. like a new language,
the heart colours
everything

She doesn't know how to give it back—
embarrassing if he hadn't noticed
or meant all along for her to keep it. can you fake light?
More than likely he's grown
a new one, the way starfish
regenerate limbs, heavens
the way he gives himself away *his second wife,*
his ex-partner said

he'd need multiples.

“As members of human society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another—whether the touch is physical, oral, emotional or imaginary. Contact is crisis. As the anthropologist says, ‘Every touch is a modified blow.’ The difficulty presented by any instance of contact is that of violating a fixed boundary, transgressing a closed category where one does not belong.”

Anne Carson

Men in the Off Hours

ONCE A MURDERER

Once a murderer held a door open for her.
It was Supreme Court; they were returning

modified

after a break. She glanced at him,
a Vietnamese in black polyester,
said, *Thank you*, and rustled by,
chewing on acknowledging
the good manners of someone
who'd hacked a man to death.

not wanting to touch

The sound, a witness said,
a knife going into watermelon

physical, oral

The man she was there for
was guarding witnesses.

Every few months, she sees him
at court or over coffee
with eight of them crowded into a booth,

a closed category
where one does not
belong

listens to him swear and make jokes
that ought to be
totally unacceptable.
And yet, as she did with the murderer
who held the door,
she scoots on by. She laughs, accepts

he makes her free of the
door marked "Authorized
Personnel Only"

his crisp shirt,
his clean trimmed fingernails.

His wife's picture
on his desk.

Her own husband on a line
so frayed she threatens to cut it.
But they honour their snapped-tight tie
and tow it everywhere:
red, luminous, awkward as a hot air balloon.
they come encumbered

Now, on the street corner,
filthy snow against the curb,
the other man tells her about an arrest
he's planning tonight,
a sexual predator. **anthropologists**
say, 'Every

His face lit-up, attention honed so fine
hawk, hurtling down
it's almost delight,
though what he knows already
lacerates;
wait until after the interrogation.
The four-year-old with gonorrhoea—
in early morning hours
when he can't sleep
he tells himself,
serve and protect

Wind from the western mountains
is a thin blade.
Behind his head,
the glacier holds its austere white witness
saying what it always says to the sky.
light & open arms

He hugs the woman goodbye.

If her daughter ever asked
what's between them
she would tell her a door. A knife
against the heart
open

THE HUG

When she sees him unexpectedly
at the tire store,

**where one does
not belong**

green coat and shiny tie
with cartoon characters on it
that no male in her family would wear,

her brother's elegant silks

but she likes anyway because it's his,
he raises his arm in a *C'mere*
and have a hug gesture.

she doesn't even think
transgressing

She slips into the half-circle of warmth
he makes and looks up.

welcomes his smell of soap,
clean shirt

He smiles down.

Winter stretches until they stand at the edge
of some larger place, sun-filled,
a ravine below them another step
would tumble
them

oral, emotional

into.

she wants in

She basks
on the edge.

a fixed boundary

He carries the weight
of so many victims' stories,
there's darkness back of his eyes;
maybe that's why she plummets into them

bleakness x warmth:
his face lights the way
newspaper catches flame
from a match

forgets to notice
if they're blue or green.

Their clinging amid the smell of rubber,
concrete and December cold is discomfiting.

embarrassing comfort

We should break away, she thinks,
but she's always savoured
nestling close to the chest
of a good-looking man

this man with dark marks
under his eyes,
thinning hair

and he seemed to be memorizing her face
like an Indentikit sketch he hoped he'd never need,
holding her like luck.

She is not over him as she believed
though she remembers her husband—

**any instance of
contact**

his green coat almost the same colour
and soft feel—

smell of Christmas
evergreen, bags of free
popcorn

She is afraid her friend standing behind them
will chastise her later
when they and don't and don't
move apart.

**Every touch is a
modified**

**contact is that of
violating**

eyes locked,
lives passing, dazzling as cruise ships
against the choppy sea.

Going north in Johnstone Strait,
a fishboat bucks a westerly for hours.
When he leaves with only a quick sideways hug,
she's thankful. They're making progress, **perhaps**
motoring on by.

LIGHT ON MOVING WATER

Separated for weeks by a perilous
expanse of air,
they greet one another boisterous
as travellers at an arrivals lounge.

**emotional or
imaginary
Contact**

Down below, the sea glistens, pewter
and malleable, scored
by the changing geometries of tugboats.

see how high they are?

Wakes open into triangles
fan out smooth again
much the way their lives intersect
and go on, empty
of all but the forgiveness of water.

& guilt, a stone that won't
warm

**the touch is
physical**

When they hug,
he says, *You're looking wonderful*;
it's a mantra.
Walking toward his office door
he presses her close,
she wonders how innocent
touch can ever be.

breast to chest again

he talks about hoping she'd
wear a raincoat to his office
nothing on underneath

On the steps, she moves upwind
from his cigarette;
they talk with others from work.
His face so close to hers, smiling,

**violating a fixed
boundary**

his eyes, there's a discontinuity—
she's in the air looking down at
ocean, waiting

again

to stop falling beside him
metal handrail at her back.

Ambiguities swim silver between them

but this much she takes away,
a fish: his affection is huge,
a noun, and reflects.

boil & glint
shadow in the deeps
Every touch

light on moving water

TODAY SHE IS INVISIBLE

Today she is invisible.

**perhaps the most
difficult task we
face daily**

she doesn't mind much;
it frees her.
She is starting to understand.

herself glazed in the mirror
of his eyes, object

Before court, what attracts him
are Crown counsel, officers in suits
who cluster by the doors.
Men and women conspicuous
by radiant cleanliness;

**emotional or
imaginary**

if they cannot keep creation
from splintering
into murderers and victims,
they can at least shower
and get their hair cut often.

subject & object

stars of their own shows

They smile at her, she's *the professor*, familiar
and well-dressed.

stitches them into story,
spotlights

Still, witness room doors close
in her face.
At breaks, a phalanx goes
downstairs and she's invited to join
only sometimes.

police stand outside &
smoke, droop like
hydrangeas, thirsty to be
told they've done well on
the stand; she waters them

On the stand,
he has bags under his eyes
she never sees face to face.
Something about losing
her way when they're too close

it's called violating your
personal space: he's shown
her the technique
in interrogation

though she should know by now.

why does he do this?

There are enough jokes about him and women.

He tells a story with clear plastic
evidence bags.

safe distance

The accused's blood-spattered checked shirt.
Shoes that match footprints in blood
by the body.

**Every touch is a
modified blow**

Today, being invisible,
she sees for miles all along the valley;
stump ranches where people make
prayers of work, the forest
with its dark ripple of evergreens.
She understands the warmth between them
had gone beyond game;
his intense recognition
fierce and open as a red-winged hawk

dropping, the crisp sound
of feathers against air

prey in sight.

Now he has sheered off.

She won't offer more unguarded smiles.

He looks weary and elegant.
The hug she didn't get today
reverberates
but she sees
he wants only the surface flash
between male and female:

give him a moment
when he wasn't distracted
and he would embrace
by reflex.

She is a reflex with him.
A woman with bright lipstick
to tease,
a civilian conspicuous in his world,
the bleak four a.m. one where human blood
pools on floors

where he is a hunter.

She moved.
Of course he'd pounced.

perhaps

over lunch (nothing red)
the blood-spatter expert
from Halifax gossips about
marital infidelity

**boundary,
transgressing**

this is what his pager, going
at four a.m. means: yellow
intestinal fluid on the
mattress & floor,
red high as the ceiling

**crisis. As the
anthropologists
say**

SLEEPING BEAUTY* BECOMES INDIGNANT AT JAVA JUNCTION
* the unclaimed child

What she sees this time is him stroking
her hair, a gesture of such intimacy **a closed category**
she couldn't believe
he'd reach out and fondle her
in front of another officer, where's your discretion?
even if she was off-duty.
She and her friend had been talking
about how Shan was to be Watch Commander
and whose ass she'd chew, being Shan:
the Queen of Mean
nothing personal mind you,
*looks like she belongs on
the back of a bike,*
another officer once said
then her friend mentioned his name
and said, Oh look what are the odds?
and it was him wearing sunglasses
a different green jacket
than the one he wore all winter.
He was working outside, the Queen of
Mean waiting for caffeine;
she elicits full confessions
from rapists, pats them on
the arm
and wouldn't join them but
while he waited for coffee he drifted
over and stood beside their table
just long enough to caress her bonding technique used in
interrogation
as if his hands didn't know
he was still talking
and she, she leaned into his touch
as if it were home. **The difficulty
presented**

Catch-and-release, the long silver solidity
of the fish gleaming, twisting in arcs, dull light
as he pulls one toward the bank. **perhaps the most,
oral**

Days now she has known
answers rise like bubbles to some vast horizontal plane
where oxygen changes form. **The difficulty
presented by any
instance of contact**

Across the table, she warms herself
at his eyes' transparent fire. this she believes implicitly
How grizzled his eyebrows are,
white against black like quick lines of *no*, repeated.
This is what love means, returning to where you can
breathe

she thinks. We break the surface, inhale,
shake our heads in wonder.

Always before, she's liked to bring fish home.
This business of cherish-and-release
leaves her gasping. **a closed category**

2. BODY LANGUAGE

“78% of communication is body language, 12% is tone of voice, what’s left is the actual words.”

Summary of recent brain-based learning research

Who can abide the day when
what's hidden is uncovered?
A murderer cultivated,
the ramping blackberry cozened
into telling about thorns, while ghosts
whisper of white roots
of dry flowers she let slip
lined up by the steps?
The sky-colour of a Himalayan beauty
before she left it too long in sun. blue wants wet
Best to stay with the petals of mallow, pallid
as fresh bones never are. but nowhere near as
exciting

Her invocation
the common dazzle of life.
a growing concern

AFTER THE HEARING: CRIME SCENE PHOTOS

“Death’s at the bottom of everything, Martins.
Leave death to the professionals.”

Graham Greene

The body reclines
between embossed plastic covers,

waits for the jolting wonder of its death
to be appreciated in eighty photographs.

Doesn’t it upset you? she’d
asked the evidence officer
over lunch. His fork stayed
in air. *The RCMP teaches you
to be professional.*

All spectators
present are strangers.

holidays, children, parents
trail behind them, invisible;
the plume of rich waving
life we all take for granted

The body is in rigour; the pathologist’s report
mentions lividity on the right side; purple black pooling blood
that’ll never be redistributed
by a pumping heart

one outflung hand holds the dancing brass
of a crack pipe. It is cold by Comox

lake, in the tall evergreens. The body,
snow smell on the wind
which is Vietnamese and spoke

with an accent and has mussed black hair,
never bothered to learn what rooted things

Then firelight will flash on steel,
the wet heavy chopping sounds

of a human dying begin.

the sounds won't stay

stuck

in the

photo

album

PRACTISING FOR THE POLICE TEST

Alone at night in bed,
she hugs her own back, shrunk
into rippled strength.

research gone mad, her
husband says

She runs a hand over her leg:
it's like someone else's,
the way muscle stretches hard
over bone.

She is hard, in this embodiment,

swaggers when she walks,
will not ask for kisses

the way she stares without blinking
down the barrel
of her husband's disapproval
when he is home (seldom).

She sits on the green sofa,
he on the beige. Raised newspaper
isolates
the two of them.

She wants to say,

& does not

*Be proud
of me.* Her eyes tear.

at night, a white bird sits on
her chest & mourns

The gap between them whistles
with the dark of what her husband aims
and aims.

DEAD CRUSADER WISDOM & SEX

The woman lies down on a word
of her choosing,

this troubled summer
cracks through like a rock
portal; you can see blue on
the other side

stone, hollowed to her shape;
rides rest like some ancient knight,
arms folded over the peace she pulls
from behind the starry glow of universe.
Dead crusader wisdom.

wishes to be petrified or wise;
any guise

All night the word floats her calm

if she stirs,
anger, the red tide hisses

as a psalm. July, and the Seal Bay
a mass of polished reflections, colours
flow in ovals, overhead the sky wheels
dizzy with the emphasis of sun,
its huge feline intensity.

she and her husband lost
in an immensity of snarls

On shore, the woman's demons swarm:
scarlet cruciform of desire, the relentless
way she conspires to be loved.

What does passion have to do with faithfulness;
everything? Nothing?

pull of hot-wired sex

She renews her affection for the cat, stays unkissed, grudgingly
who's into four a.m. trysts.

The small body purring next to hers,
the way he gifts
pats with eager lifts of his head, is balm
even if not applied where it could do
the most good.

It is a harsh summer.

frac-

tured

Perhaps the word she wants is water:
at least water moves

WHAT DOOR

The woman lunges from a dried-up pond
runs for a red coat to save her

passion of an arrow
arcing toward the target

In the woods, what door will open?

Her family watch from the forest edge;
they don't believe she is able to pass
through or even in.
Only her rough-coated hound follows.
If she stayed, the wind would own her.

unseen, bending master
of desiccation

In the woods, what door will open?

something must give; she
doesn't realize until years
later, it was her

By the Koksilah river she was arid. A crack of stone
held her. She couldn't love more.

split-
ting

all she had she'd emptied, it was not enough
and the longing would not leave.

Gold bound and burned until she took
off her ring and hid it in a cup of green clay.

She wanted the hunter but he was never hers.

to him, she was game

Do you hear, husband? Since you cannot hold her
she is running to the firs. dark & what door?

What's vowed has been set aside.
It's no longer a question.

SUDDEN DEATH CALL

Two weeks after her mother's death,
they are the second police car out front.
It's three a.m., ambulance already in the drive,
an expected death.

*Come in if you want, but
give your head a shake,
the officer says*

Behind the high fir hedge, in the house,
the body on the sierra delta call
waits. The woman stays in the car.

Like spawning salmon, she's losing bits.

the final purple metaphor
of lividity

Instead of skin fragments,
and fins scraped down to bone,
she runs on pure heart: it's muscle
isn't it? Last week when a friend
woke her at midnight, the shrill of the phone
in her silent house was another tiny violence:

Mum?

who else has died?
But it was about northern lights.

Tonight is not a coroner's case.

An old man,
bouquets in the house still
from his wife's death.

The wife's death was unexpected,
as was her own mother's passing.

That's the problem, the woman remains stuck
at the hospital desk, stuck, incredulous
carrying a giant pot of purple chrysanthemums,
her mother's morning paper.

The nurse leans forward.
Are you. . . ? I'm so sorry. . .

Her world tissue paper tear -ing

Before, anticipations stayed steady;
her mother always there to greet her
at the ferry terminal,
her blue coat, a slightly anxious frown
until she saw her. Then hugs, the smell
of cigarettes and face cream, happiness.

Now the woman inhabits a wavering landscape,
kleenex box in hand.

death is like walking
through weeks of
earthquake. air shivers,
the ground moves,
she moves somehow

Perpetually
she trips on the stair that isn't there,
goes to phone her mother
with news of—
her own—
she'll be waiting—

Guess what, Mum? You d—

—the quiet road shines in rain.
The officer the woman is riding with
comes out, says *I put the kettle on for tea;*
a neighbour came over.

Together they pace under a street light.
The thought of tea, simple kindness tea is hot, tea is real
a star the woman orients by
in the shifting treacherous dark. tea you can hold

ON THE DUKE POND FERRY

His gaze slid from hers like glass. try: clear ice. try: slipping
I never met a woman yet
worth half my pension, he said. practice: slamming
into a gate

She glanced at him, dumb as a secret.
So he was not going to leave his wife:
she'd known that for months.

They were adrift in the months
he'd gentled her with touch. On black glass,
reflections of light skittered. No one's wife
pushed her husband out
now, she'd told him earlier, yet
hoped for assurance, secret
holdback evidence of love. Instead, he said
what he did. Police subtlety. She said
nothing to the shard he flicked. Let him rehash months
of gossip with the other officer, secrets
about smashed shoulders, everyone edgy as glass:
broken
the blond man so rude she longed to slap yet
held off: *Where's your wife?*
looks like someone's
grandmother,
another officer had said

You his mistress? The meeting was accident, his wife
and pension safe, they'd been chaste, said
nothing incriminating, yet body language,
bawdy language
a person could've bounced on their bonds for months.

Now, as January dark slipped by the glass,
she saw his narrow clever face had saved no secrets
for her. He was a fence too high to leap, a secret
stonewall. The wind was up, light dim, and his wife
had the only jumping rights here, glass

this is how horses die,
trying the possible
at a wrong angle

this was about money, he'd said,
so to speak. She thought *Got you fine on that*, months
of what he apparently called flirting yet

now her own life was a trampled steeplechase. Yet
anger between her and her husband wasn't secret,
gleamed toxic as black walnut. She didn't regret the months
she'd cherished this man [remember, a wife?],
though now, to the mistress question, she said
zero, let him answer, while in the glass,

mirror mirror on the wall

his reflection was strange, yet familiar as an injury, wife
the open secret. What ached was what he'd kept alive, unsaid.
She'd hear him say pension for months, face shuttered glass.

never met another woman yet
worth

RED FEATHERS

This afternoon she is so light with loss
teetering in the new place
she could fly downstream
parallel to grey water, tidal,
the weak path of sun,
a sand crane with that red slap shock of red
Japanese good luck across her feathers.
home has wings, keeps
shifting
Too much loss. The full year distorts
like wax in sun. she balances like an
exhausted
skater, drooping over ice
She bends, gives as much attention
to the coarse ruffle of unfolding elderberry leaves
as the moment will bear.
Then a cap of moss on a fence post.
green, see how perfect
each filament?
Significant details.
This morning she watched the dark eyebrows
of a man three pews down from her,
wondered if he was single, wept. her love's hair
at the back, the clean
smell of him
Death has such a strong burn
perhaps after a while it would be possible
to miss it. the dead talk back, you
know

Grace, pale as the crane's underside.
Lightness, those are the beige wings,
the everyday strength that makes it possible
to lift, air sliding cool, pushing up.

she walks, works,
keeps a clean house

Joy. That's the impossible one,
scarlet attachment, the heart delighting
in its *lubba lubba* of life.

she'd settle for a spirit that
didn't whirl round like the
vortex in a bath drain

Weightless as paper she floats
the river path in mild white afternoon;
little holds her.

Moment by moment, she's left with the puzzle

how is it you do this?

terrestrial motion, the ground.

ANGEL OF MYSTERY

Suspended between destination and arrival
the highway hangs between mountains
and storm fronts.

Like ghostly bamboo curtains

between home and echoes
of no-longer-home

she drives in and out of rain,
beads solid.

Here, between evergreens and rock,
the world defines itself

loneliness, star-music sings
all into being

chords of praise.

Plainsong of the mid-Island,

a woman, a dog

in a white car. Ahead, three clouds

vertical as paisley

swirl in thickening air.

She hungers for the angel of the masculine.

like when you hug a man
you really like, the way his
neck smells

Traveling through the mountains
she stumbles across images of men
she's loved, their absence solid
as a set of child's blocks
(primary colours)
strewn in a darkened hall
for a foot to find.

the lurch when you loose
your balance & flail

According to the foretelling's permutations
of disaster and desire—
this man will pull her, laughing,
out of the kitchen to walk in falling snow;

cards riffle, fan on a table

this man will fill with an anger so continental
she'll flinch for years at his voice—
there are four possible bindings:
sex, love, security, mystery.
She'll take the angel of mystery, she thinks,
plunges the car
between another shivery set of beads.

grey, rattling
like tiny secrets

PINK LILIES

She is a woman who lusts after pink lilies,
the open mouths of inlets
blurred by mist.
Nothing is ever simple.
The man who says he loves his wife
but runs his hands over her.
She stamps and shivers,
steams like a horse in rain.

In the midst of moving,
she almost buys a pot of poppies,
fringed and pink as a velvet shawl.
She tries not to let men too close;
those who fall through some loop
of politeness, lodge in affection
for years, hurt like splinters.
She prefers the cold blue beckonings
of salt water channels to the warm mouth of a man
who belongs to another.

She is a woman who surrounds herself
with flowers and fresh-baked cookies
as if domesticity could fence out passion.
Long ago the tide spat her out, broken.
She re-formed as an anemone,
muscular and stinging,
though every cell cries out for the slow
tidal charity of salt.

Made new, she looks for a singularity,
some place where rock meets water
and gets fertile: she would incite a riot
of poppies, a hunger of hot lilies.
She wants a man who can touch her like a colour.
Islands fascinate, and gardens,
how they are made and pass to others;
the deep startle certain pinks create
when she encounters them, swaying.

MAKING A GOOD RECOVERY

She stands behind his desk
just visiting

[is this like her mother's
famous *Just tidying, dear,*
in the kitchen?]

one hand on his shoulder
the softness of corduroy a reproach she endures
like a bronze bell on her heart: verdigris, vertigo
isn't this what she has been toiling toward,
giving up him wanting her? & sometimes succeeds,
though not now

On his computer screen
he hooks an image of his son
with a 1,200 pound Roosevelt elk

His shirt like her husband's [ask not for whom the bell]
green and soft textures
She leaves her hand on his shoulder

He pulls up another flash
of prone brown: he and his son crouched,
grinning above the dead elk antlers dismayingly
like a reindeer's

In the photo his skin is creased,
he looks old
beside his handsome boy; [*say it*, bloody ancient]

it changes nothing
between them well-used heroes
of their own stories

He tells her of his new pup,
a man who assaulted an eighty-year old woman
he broke her back & & & details the damage so
professionally, then says,
It got to me more than anything
since that murder with those
poor kids, you remember?
[the axe, the blood,
the prince]

The eighty-year old is making a good recovery,
she asked He got eighteen years,
more than a murderer

Walking to the lunchroom for coffee with others,
she says, *My husband and I are back together*
He hugs her
[is the desire to elbow him
sharply, murmur *bastard*
fictional?]

Though they will soon go back
to the lives that are their real ones,
their partners,
words now are oxygen, breathe. breathe again
the day itself clear and green as water
or air on a hot June afternoon
shimmering about a bell [for thee!]

When she leaves, she shakes herself
Light still rings across her eyes

HE PULLS HER THE WAY A SCAR

He pulls her the way a scar does; red, half-healed weal
there's that odd puckered satisfaction.

If she phoned, looking into the maple's tossing sea,
a hundred miles away he'd call her *sweetheart*.

her & half the town

There's that odd puckered satisfaction.

If she phoned, they could talk fishing
but not crime;

*got a 30 lb halibut in T. & a
suspect in A. we're arresting
today*

a hundred miles away he'd call her sweetheart.

Secrets twist through him like mad electrons.

tales whisking [the baby
murder others told her
about?]

They could talk fishing but not murders,
he's braided silence into breath.

Secrets twist through him like mad electrons;
puffiness under his eyes, his shoulders slump.

a sick man, she thinks,
but no one's telling her
anything

He's braided silence into breath;
the confessions he's absorbed into flesh,

visible impact

puffiness under his eyes, his shoulders slump.

Visitor's chair so high, her feet don't touch the floor.

The confessions he's absorbed into flesh,
padlocked file cabinets.

Visitor's chair so high, her feet don't touch the floor

Silence is a wall imposed on him. *ka-chung!*

HEART ATTACK

On the phone, her friend said, *He's had a heart attack . . .*
Are you there? between them a hundred miles,
yawning air.

He was alive, in intensive care.
The house elongated to a whistling tunnel.
On the phone, her friend said, *He's had a heart attack . . .*

Airlifted. Alive. She had the city name;
she'd call the hospitals, tip his name into
yawning air.

In the living room, she murmured something
to her husband, another friend over for dinner.
On the phone, her friend said, *He's had a heart attack . . .*

Weightless, she tumbled. Table, faces, stretched
wrong-end-of-the binoculars far in the
yawning air.

Christmas-red candles guttered. The evening lurched, broken.
She willed it to end so she could find him.
On the phone, her friend said, *He's had a heart attack . . .*
Yawning air.

THE QUESTION

When one sister asks *Do you love him?*

the other's response slides out
easily as hot broth slips
down, brown and rich

how dare she?
yesss
why is she so quick
to answer?

steam wafts from a blue Japanese bowl.
In Steveston, they walk by expensive stores.
It's blowing thirty sou'east,
wind from the river cold as a wife's
palm across a husband's face,

Don't you ever ever dare again—

what she imagines
his wife said
last time
the time before

The light grey. Clouds the colour
of new bruises skirl by.
All those wakings at three a.m.
Signs bang.

Banners flap bright on lamp posts. crisp as laundry on a line

Blonde hair whips across the sisters' faces.
The response hangs, pulses.

Well, the sister who asked the question finally says.
The sound like a balloon let go
across a room; the sigh of what she doesn't say
loud.

They leave it there, the man's name,
his heart attack recovery
flutter out behind,
invisible scarves in the tearing April air.
cold sssilk

LAW & ORDER

Man 1*

fire burns through the glass of the woodstove, darkly
she waits for him to come back from solving murders
she is afraid, but believes him because of the heat

afraid he uses thirty-two years of police knowledge
to ratchet the tie between them tighter

fire burns through the glass of the woodstove, darkly

alters the weather that crosses her face just to see he can do it
she is afraid, but believes him because of the heat

the connection is there, how rare, he'd said

she sees a lariat around her feet

fire burns through the glass of the woodstove, darkly

Man 2*

she sallies back to the
Valley

the looks her husband
shoots her
enough to fry an egg

a hundred miles away,
he feels too warm;
unbuttons his shirt

nervous as a long-tailed cat
in a room full of rocking
chairs

cooking his medium of
exchange;
waft of sautéed garlic,
herbs & potatoes

twirled in a circle, his world
eyes like sun in July
she is afraid, but believes him because of the heat
on TV, *Law & Order* plays
five days a week,
his favourite
in drenched fields, horses steam
suddenly as summer sun heats the landscape after rain
fire burns through the glass of the woodstove, darkly
passion makes her husband
anxious
passion has vast red wings,
could eat
the whole house
she is afraid, but believes him because of the heat

* The difference between Man(slaughter)1, Man(slaughter)2, and
Murder is one of intent

THE TRICK WITH LIGHT

The trick is to love her husband across the table
more, not less, because of the other man.
She nips soft skin on her husband's neck.
Oxblood walls, wood floors, brilliant orchids.

More, not less, because of the other man
becomes her rule. What good's faithfulness otherwise?
Oxblood walls, wood floors, brilliant orchids.
The house smells of scones, fresh-baked.

Friends, the other man claims, but
their touch is too barbed with longing for that;
he grabs her, she slides into his arms as if he's summer.
Hands are always colliding.

She cannot mention his name at home.
Her husband darkens, steams.
Give the man up?
She works with him, irregularly.

So she takes light and braids it,
haltingly; she knows no precedent
for this luminous splicing where
affection flies like cottonwood fluff.

Respect. Honour. Cherish.
This is what cooking and bed
are about, the pink elongation
of orchids, the way she coaxes

them back into bloom.
She nips soft skin on her husband's neck.
Light lies between them, a river twenty years deep.
The trick is to love her husband across the table.

CONFESSION

The grey day sang, December with fog, evergreens wiped
halfway to another dimension.

What was brilliant was warmth in the coffee bar,
how he stroked one hand then two along her arm,
fences falling like dominoes in a meadow,
between them, a huge lilt and tilt, hot cups emptying.

On the table dangled confession, empty

hers, naturally, isn't that
how every good police
narrative goes, with a
suspicious character
confessing?

now of its lightning, wiped
by the acknowledgement of love, the slow meadow

of marriage to others an acknowledged dimension;

wildcards face-up from
the beginning

*I assumed if we'd met one another earlier, he raised his arm,
we'd be together now, while behind the bar*

a young man dried mugs, she approached the last high bar,

is this stranger listening
as they murmur?

his reputation for affairs, he said the rumours were empty;

lifted his shoulders, *I like to touch*—patting her arm—

She whipped cynicism and wiped

it into belief, the level green dimension

two RCMP witnesses she's
disregarding, she sees again
the wagging finger: his wife
said *No no no. Twice is
bad enough, a third time,
I'll leave you*

of trust, he'd never lied to her, a meadow
four years,
she'll go with him

the stream of their lives flowed through, a meadow
leaps into belief
like clear water

fringed with alder, slow nitrogen-fixing roots baring
joy, this tenuous opal dimension:
suddenly she loves her
husband as if skewered
with light

no unfaithfulness, no vows made empty,
only repetition: how they connected, day wiped
bare of all but tenderness, release and twine of arms.
though her husband would
not approve of this
canoodling

Ours is the affair that never was, he said, armed
as usual, laughed in the open meadow,
the round green "police"
tab on his belt
so civilians won't freak
if they glimpse his gun

they'd read body language, though words had been wiped
from their lexicon, had met for years in coffee bars
with the *bissh* of cappuccino makers frothing, emptying
and, till now, held back speaking of this charged dimension
*Withholding information long
enough turns into a lie*

of desire and unavailability, dimension
fringed with responsibility, fraught space between arms;
someone he knows could wander in any moment, empty
their space of intimacy, though looking only for a latté meadow,
and in fact his phone rings, a bar
chungs down: *Our bad guy's on the move*, he says, swiping

crime into their softer dimension while in the meadow
tall grasses yellowed. They rose, bumped arms, left the coffee bar
charged, emptying. *What might have been* burnished and wiped.

COMMAND KEY TO THE GREEN & SPARKLING WORLD

By water and what lies within
by fire and what lies between
by scales by fur and by feathers
by a straight twig
and a pruned one
by blue and the blaze of it bright between
the cover of sky and bed of land
by white clouds and black horses a-wheel
in formation, by lance and pennant fluttering
by penance
by grey nuns
by a canal and a promise
by tadpoles by tulips by their yellow and red
thousands
by the life of a small animal
by the fragrance of its fur
by afternoon sun
by the west wind
by a house where kitchen counters shine
by bone and fealty
by mended pockets
by a flat line and a red one
by a fir, broken yet growing
by Altair by Sirius by the long hissing breath of a quasar
who could have believed
they could dream one another
so completely into being?

Benedictus benedicat

Amen*

*

-) It is so . . . used after a formal statement to express solemn ratification or agreement
-) Utterance of the interjection “amen”
-) An expression of concurrence or assent

3 CRIME & POETRY

Poetry

- * blows off steam with colour & form & a killer ending
- * is a magician conducting a swarm of killer bees
- * coalesces ghosts clearly enough to induce tears

Crime

- * causes death by directed steam
- * waves the anaphylactic shock kit just out of reach
- * on a dark January bridge, urges "Jump!"

- * **poetry is the swing of a crane, sliding slabs of words through resistance**
- * **crime is a mouth, hard-shut against meaning, averted eyes**

WAYS & MEANS YOU CAN ASK

- * carrying a yellow sheaf of wild irises
- * wearing sunglasses
- * in parenthesis
- * in triplicate, pressing hard to make copies
- * using a crow as messenger
- * with a loaded gravel barge
- * at the end of a long day
- * with vomit-spattered boots
- * with deadly force
- * on your knees
- * according to seniority
- * with charm
- * in a cold wind
- * with a gift of cookies
- * at length
- * with a guilty conscience
- * by the book
- * with the video pick-up turned off
- * with bad coffee administered at regular intervals

- * **poetry is sunlight stealing into a wooden crate of dynamite**
- * **crime is tossing in a lit phrase**

WAYS TO ESCAPE** CRIME

** ESCAPE:

-) to hustle your buns away
-) to zoom in the opposite direction
-) to make good your departure from a crime scene

- * levitate
- * don't leave your backyard
- * turn right at the red light
- * slow for farm traffic
- * by space shuttle
- * give away your TV
- * don't stop for coffee with RCMP pals
- * avoid the use of clashing colours
- * become a Buddhist, pick up spiders in the hallway, set them outside
- * post yellow and black signs at your front & back doors: "aliens on duty"
- * swear to avoid Hallmark rhymes
- * take off by boat
- * get deeply involved in meteorology
- * obey the speed limit [+ or - 10 km]
- * walk everywhere with two German Shepherds
- * get thee to a nunnery
- * research & write a monograph on varieties of olive oil
- * sizzle with satisfaction

- * **poetry is a 30-lb salmon shaking the noun from its mouth**
- * **crime is a peeping Tom, drooling colours**

CRIME DOESN'T PAY

- *crime doesn't play nicely
with others, the kindergarten boy who jumps
from the teeter totter, the girl at the other end thudding
to the ground, mouth bloody
- *crime doesn't pay, dines & dashes
in a restaurant, server still with one arm up
- *crime essays easy riches;
only fools work
- *crime stays a ray of moonshine
high & skittering with schemes
- *crime likes to sashay [once too] often to a bank,
shotgun a lethal baby in his arms
- *hey hey, every bad guy knows he's *supposed* to lose
- *crime eats from orange cafeteria trays
in the Joint, puts on weight
- *crime goes grey in the creases
won't take no for an answer
announces an indefinite stay
of good judgment
- *crime doesn't know how to play
as if others are real

- * **poetry is a temple roof, orange in sun; bells at the corners**
- * **to scare away demons**
- * **crime is giving silencers to the waiting stair ghosts**

WAYS TO IDENTIFY BAD GUYS

- * by phone
- * by phrenology
- * by tie colour
- * by restaurant choice
- * with DNA from a flashlight handle
- * via CPIC**or Interpol: **Canadian Police Information Centre
- * [by income:
the top 2% of crooks get a stock option***] *** a new board game, patent pending
- *from the ViCLAS**** registry **** RCMP's Violent Crime Linkage Analysis System
- * in court
- * with glee
- * from a lineup
- * from the damage they leave in their wake:
bodies, stolen cars
- *with foot prints in the sand***** ***** the evidence officer hurries to make a cast

- * **poetry is light standing out in the rain, twiddling
a word over your head**
- * **crime stabs you with the word**

MODES* OF TRANSPORT

*MODE

)a fashion statement, a
style, often affected,
sometimes profoundly
) method, a way

- * four-footed & sniffing, nose
to the ground
- * a colossal bar of Swiss chocolate
- * the starship *Enterprise*
- * [chime] “BC Ferries welcomes you aboard”
- * lethal injection
- * really great sex
- * the tide of old age
- * chewing on a problem
- * choking on assumptions
- * snowmobile
- * a deliberate act of tenderness
- * watering a loved garden
- * plunging into the pit of despair
- * sleep
- * the primates’ friend, “the courtship gaze”
- * sudden desolation
- * earthquake
- * dogsled
- * travois
- * pretty decent sex
- * high anxiety
- * bound & gagged in the back of a Jag
- * death by misadventure
- * reading a crime novel
- * ingestion of a fine, sufficient quantity of sushi

- * mistaking wasabi for avocado
- * a matched team of white Leghorn chickens
- * telling ghost stories
- * snatched by aliens
- * entering a room scented
with fresh lilacs

- * **poetry is a recessed light over a doorway.
the light on, the night dark**
- * **crime is shooting out the light**

HOW TO GET HERE* FROM THERE

- * by amazement
- * by an open door
- * by a tunnel, suddenly
- * by rhyme, by repetition
- * by the soft flung handfuls of cottonwood snow
- * by the magic that cavorts
in a June-green wood
- * by two tawny Belgian horses
yoked together
- * by rowboat by dream
- * by accident or
sudden laughter

*HERE, of course, represents the sweet spot, the flanged
brass pivot from which everything turns

- * **poetry is a crime scene waiting to be deciphered**
- * **crime is poetry smeared with bodily fluids**

WAYS TO SAY GOODBYE*

GOODBYE*

[with theatrical grins &
whitened teeth,
a la “Sound of Music”]
all together now: *So long,*
farewell, it's time that we
must leave

- * with a wet kiss
- * with a stop sign
- * by monorail
- * via Grand Central Canyon
- * in a whisper
- * without meaning it
- * over the phone
- * in the shower, when you are alone
- * at 3 a.m.
- * by moving to another city
- * by letter
- * with a dry kiss
- * AT HIGH VOLUME
- * with a one-word sticky note left on the computer
- * through bitchy poems
- * by carrier pigeon
- * through mental telepathy
- * the use of repetition
- * in a foreign language neither of you know

- * **poetry is effervescence boiling
down a long flight of stairs**
- * **crime is willfully pitching a person
into that torrent**

WAYS* TO SAY HELLO

* WAYS

-) chalk lines drawn
from a predetermined
spot
-) a marine rail line running
into the water, from
which vessels may be
pulled in order to effect
repairs
-) modes, methods

- * cheerfully
- * at a distance
- * by megaphone
- * in the morning
- * with a nuzzle to the neck
- * by email to a computer in the same house
- * with face averted
- * with white ink on black paper
- * with a hug
- * with bacon for breakfast
- * running to meet one another
- * in passing
- * *en masse*
- * with a photo
- * the two of you in different vehicles,
windows rolled down, engines running
- * waving from the deck of an ocean liner
- * by phone, with no name given
- * with a fresh-picked rose (pink
or red) tucked into the sash
- * with song

- * **poetry is a minefield salted with pots of vivid colour**
- * **crime is not watching when the field blows up**

WAYS TO GET THE TRUTH**

** “What is truth?” asked Pilate. With that sound bite, he established himself as an important & quotable historical weasel.

- * by hook
- * laid out in an illustrated step-by-step assembly guide in five languages
- * after a long dry spell
- * from an informant
- * from the Ikea catalogue
- * with a screwdriver
- * during a sojourn in the desert
- * from a talking bush
- * an epiphany while dining in a French restaurant
- * dipped up in a bucket from a deep well***

*** This obviously refers back to the Samaritan woman by Jacob’s well. Jesus teased her by saying if she drank his living water, she wouldn’t have to come back. The concept of metaphor was new to her.

- * from an ad on TV
- * from the Oracle of Delphi
- * trolling for information
- * a still small voice

- * during a car crash
- * from an in-flight magazine
- * in the middle of the night
- * over coffee with friends
- * in a book
- * from a [well-meaning] bird

- * **poetry is a smooth rock in the hand:
if it was good enough for David . . .**
- * **crime is the same rock from behind; night
& reflections from street lights skitter across puddles,
tires hiss on wet pavement**

WAYS TO COLLECT GHOSTS**

**GHOSTS, a remote
possibility,
the ghost of a chance

- * along fencelines
- * from anthologies
- * in the wild
- * on a dark and stormy night
- * fondling red & yellow blanket flowers
- * huddling in a tool shed
- * from the back of an ambulance
- * balancing on clouds
- * hiding behind sunglasses
- * at the perfume counter
of large department stores
- * in the rain
- * stifling laughter
- * beside still waters
- * as a fun & inexpensive hobby
- * in multiples

- * **poetry is a huge bag of fireworks with no label.**
- * **you reach in & grab one, touch your lighter to the wick, not knowing what images will catch fire**
- * **crime is a willful refusal to ignite the images**

WAYS TO CATCH A MURDERER

- * with a noose
- * with a noise
- * in conversation
- * in passing
- * in *flagrante*
- * make neighbourhood enquiries
- * with a banana
- * wearing a bandana
- * after interrogation
- * carrying a salmon [poached]
- * with a telephoto lens
- * applying handcream
- * with the help of a large scale chart
- * during a mid-life crisis
- * running a sting
- * under a red umbrella
- * wearing black high heels
- * watching a hockey game
- * on his way home
- * carrying a heavy gym bag
- * outside a bakery, eating a cream bun
- * with a toxicology report

- * **poetry is a secret escaped for a stroll**
- * **crime is arming the secret**

HOW TO KILL A COP

- * with kindness
 - * bad coffee
 - * paperwork
 - * a rash of suicides
at Christmas**
 - * driving south
 - * with bouquets of white lilies
 - * a good bad joke
 - * the smell of hot grease,
French fries
 - * the long-term ingestion of grease
 - * curiosity
 - * illegal drugs pinched from the evidence locker
 - * wearing a bullet-proof vest in scorching weather
 - * a fresh lawyer joke
 - * a file that hits close
to home
 - * after a twelve-hour shift,
when you've just fallen asleep,
a wrong number on your cell phone. twice
 - * a Watch Commander without
a 4 a.m. sense of humour [black]
 - * allowing a civilian access to a crime scene
 - * being pall bearer
at another officer's funeral
- ** lonely lonely bodies. one
could have been your
brother

- * poetry is a red rose looking for someone suitably grave or a suitable grave, or **situation]**
- * crime is burying the rose when it's out for a walk

HOW TO KILL A CIVILIAN

- * attend a full-honours RCMP funeral
- * on the fly
- * by mistake
- * in passing
- * with a red coat
- * *It's not loaded***

*** last words heard by
Garnet Stewart Atkinson
of London, Ontario,
in 1933, before his best
friend pulled the trigger.
The entire town turned
out for the funeral.*

- * clipped by a train
- * smacked by a bear
- * rough handling by the fashion police
- * by the usual suspects
- * being the right place at the wrong time
- * in long grass
- * posing for a photograph
- * out recreational shopping
- * via bagpipe lament
- * by outlawing personal trainers, personal coaches
& bottled water
- * love a cop

[**
true story]

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Prism International: *Evergreens Remind Her*

Northwind Press: *Sudden Death Call, Red Feathers*

Room of One's Own: *Pink Lilies*

Pink Lilies won the 2002 Room of One's Own Poetry Competition

A selection of poems won first place in the 2003 CBC Literary Awards. The suite included: *Once a Murderer, The Hug, Eye Contact, Light on Moving Water, Today She is Invisible, Sleeping Beauty Becomes Indignant at Java Junction, Steelhead Fishing*. These poems have been broadcast on CBC Radio in English and French and published in *enRoute magazine*. They were also published in *The Mind's Eye: CBC Literary Awards, Winners 2001-2006*, ECW Press, 2008

Sleeping Beauty Becomes Indignant at Java Junction was published online in *Coffee Bean News*.

Most of the third section, *Crime & Poetry*, was shortlisted for the 2004 CBC Literary Awards.

Garnet Stewart Atkinson, referred to in *How to Kill a Civilian*, is the author's grandfather. The incident is true.